



# World Chronicle

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**GUEST:** Cornelio SOMMARUGA  
President  
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

**JOURNALISTS:** James Bone, *The Times* (London)  
Judy Lessing, Radio New Zealand

**MODERATOR:** Michael Littlejohns

## INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

Cornelio SOMMARUGA, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), discusses the important role the Committee and its affiliates play in providing humanitarian assistance to victims in many parts of the world. The ICRC is committed to a total ban on anti-personnel mines. To protect civilian populations caught in conflict situations, the ICRC monitors the application of international humanitarian law by the parties to those conflicts. According to Mr. Sommaruga, the international community should intervene in areas of conflict to restore law and order and allow humanitarian assistance to reach victims. In the field, the ICRC coordinates its work with other UN agencies.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

One of the most familiar symbols around the world is the red cross on a white background that symbolises the International Committee of the Red Cross and its national affiliates. For over 130 years the Red Cross has provided vital assistance to victims of conflicts and disasters, saving the lives of tens of millions of people and representing the only hope for many destitute victims. Its neutrality and impartiality have earned it the respect and cooperation of all countries of the world.

Our guest today, Cornelio Sommaruga, is President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Joining me to talk with Mr. Sommaruga are James Bone of *The Times* of London and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand.

Mr. Sommaruga, welcome to World Chronicle.

**SOMMARUGA:** I'm very happy to be here.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. President, I think that most people are pretty familiar with the ICRC and, in particular, its activities in wartime, when your people have access to prisoners of war, in particular, and try to make sure that they're treated according to the [Geneva] Conventions. Tell us a bit about your priorities in this year, 1996. What are your main activities at this time?

**SOMMARUGA:** Well, I would say that, indeed, on the basis of the mandate that we have received from the international community through the Geneva Conventions, we have two main lines: One is the question of moral principle of some issues that have to put humanitarian activities in the forefront in international relations; and the other one is the field activities to protect victims directly. Now, '96 is characterized for us first of all for an advocacy campaign to ban fully anti-personnel mines. And I have taken several positions —

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Land mines.

**SOMMARUGA:** Land mines. But I think it's important to understand anti-personnel land mines, because we are not advocating to ban also anti-tank mines or mines which are anti-vehicle; we wish to ban only the small mines which are manufactured in order to kill or maim individuals. Then there is another major problem that I always discuss when I come to New York — the relations between the political goals of the Security Council, which are implying certainly also military operations, the separation of these goals from the humanitarian. Humanitarian activity in the sense of the protection and assistance of individual victims has to be carried out, as you said before, in full neutrality, independence and impartiality. Finally, I also would like to say that in the present world — and in the last

years we had several examples — one cannot simply see that violations of international law are carried out without a direct reaction in order to stop them. The genocide of the type of Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing of the type of Bosnia-Herzegovina have never been stopped by the international community. And our reaction is to say to Governments, you have to take your responsibility, you have to intervene. It's not a humanitarian intervention, it's an intervention in order to see to it that international law is respected, and the UN Charter gives you the possibility to do it according to Chapter VII.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** And what do the Governments say in response to your appeals?

**SOMMARUGA:** I think that there is an increasing awareness of this responsibility. What is much more difficult is to find the preparedness by those Governments that should be putting troops at disposal in order to participate in such operations, to have them doing that, at least particularly for internal political reasons. But this is not a reason for us, of the Red Cross, not to insist on that. We cannot simply look at situations where you have 10,000, 100,000, or — as it was in Rwanda in three months probably — 1 million people killed without having somebody stop it. And this is of major importance. If I should then come to the second aspect, the more concrete important operations of the ICRC, I would like to recall not only Bosnia but Chechnya, where we are very present with great preoccupations because of the many victims and also because of the behaviour of the parties not respecting minimum humanitarian rules. I would like to come back to our presence in the Great Lakes region of Africa, in Rwanda and Burundi — very delicate situations in both countries.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** How about Liberia? Are you involved there?

**SOMMARUGA:** Certainly, very much involved, even if we had a setback when we had to leave Mamba Point. But Liberia brings us to a very important matter of principle that we have discussed with all the UN organs. Finally, if we look at that country in this tremendous civil war situation and great chaos for six years, the humanitarians that have come several times, again and again, have been watching horrible setbacks. Everything they had was looted, several times, including vehicles, means of communication. And a great problem arises: What is being done with all this material? And our impression is that finally this material has been used very often by the parties in the conflict to be stronger in their material for making war. And this raises a big question as to the presence of humanitarians without having law and order in the country. And our appeal has been very clearly made to the international community. It cannot go on in this way. It's not simply a question of the Red Cross. We were probably those that lost the most little material there. But all the other institutions — NGOs, international organizations — one cannot go on. There is the need to bring back law and order in such a country before the humanitarians would be present again. We have not even the assistance. But we are doing it in a complete

other way. We are coming with helicopters a few times, aid a hospital, and then withdrawing again in order not to be exposing ourselves in this sense.

**JAMES BONE:** Mr. Sommaruga, there's been a debate at the United Nations about Somalia, which was a test case of humanitarian intervention. And there are really two schools of thought. One is that it's necessary, as you say, to twin humanitarian assistance with military protection, and so you send in a big peace-keeping force to protect humanitarian convoys, as happened in Bosnia also. The other is maybe a minority view, which is that you don't need all those military; in fact, those military just get you into trouble by polarizing the situation and putting the humanitarian workers into a kind of — putting them on one side or the other, and that it would be better just to leave humanitarian workers to operate as best they can without any other military infrastructure. How do you come down on that?

**SOMMARUGA:** I think we would be in between, in the sense that we would certainly reject, as we have done very clearly in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the protection of Red Cross convoys by UN peace-keeping troops. Our protection is the Red Cross flag, and we have to negotiate our passage. But we do not reject the presence of military forces, but for another aim, not the aim of humanitarian assistance: the aim to establish law and order; the aim of stopping violations of international law, be it in Somalia, be it in Rwanda, be it in Bosnia and other places. The intervention of military contingents of the United Nations should be there in order to stop the perpetrations of unacceptable behaviours.

**BONE:** But you have at the United Nations actually a tendency these days to use humanitarian intervention as a cover for what is actually political intervention. You had it in Somalia, you have it in Bosnia, where the goals are really political but it was described as a humanitarian operation; you have it also in Burundi, where the idea of an intervention force is billed as a humanitarian intervention when the obvious goal would be to stop ethnic slaughter. Is that a perversion of —

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Well, that's humanitarian, isn't it? Stopping ethnic slaughter.

**BONE:** Well, it's also a political goal, because you're coming in on the side of one group to stop them doing something.

**SOMMARUGA:** I do not reject the intervention.

**BONE:** It might be a legitimate political goal, Michael; I'm just saying is it right to bill it as humanitarian?

**SOMMARUGA:** I do not reject it as an intervention if it is made according to the rules of the UN Charter and according to the rules of the Geneva Conventions in the behaviour of these troops. But what I reject is that it is called humanitarian. This is an alibi for Governments that are not able to solve the political problem, which is their task, and

then, in order to be popular inside their own countries, they use the humanitarian objectives. But humanitarian has to be completely outside of politics, having only one thing in mind — the individual victim to be protected and assisted.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So is this a criticism that you direct at the UN Security Council, for example? Because they have mounted these operations, as James Bone says, under the guise of humanitarianism.

**SOMMARUGA:** Well, I would say that I have many friends in the Security Council, and they know my language. I also regularly come to New York in order to meet the members of the Security Council in informal meetings, because our independence doesn't allow us to enter into a formal discussion. And every year I repeat that. And I think that also there is an awareness of the situation. In the discussions going on now in the spring of '96 as to the situation in Burundi, the word "humanitarian" hasn't necessarily been used so much as it was in the past. And I hope that one would make progress, in order not to confuse public opinion of the world, public opinion of the individual countries.

**JUDY LESSING:** Talking about confusion, Mr. Sommaruga, do you find, as a very old established humanitarian organization — maybe the oldest — that when you get into the field, the field is getting somewhat crowded by other humanitarian groups, all of whom seem to have their own agenda, and not all of whom are perhaps as neutral as you are?

**SOMMARUGA:** Well, it is certainly a problem. We are the oldest, yes, we have at least the experience — 133 years' experience. I admire all those having this enthusiasm to help, and I think we should really be grateful to all these people behind. But what is extremely delicate is to engage in humanitarian actions in conflictual situations without having the necessary professionalism and having goals which would be of a real impartiality towards the victims. And this is mainly the problem of new non-governmental organizations. We have drafted in the Red Cross movement a code of conduct for all institutions — particularly non-governmental organizations — working in these complex emergencies, and this contains some basic rules of behaviour. And there are always more of these organizations subscribing to it. Indeed, most non-governmental organizations, while making good work, have some political or religious reasons for doing it in the background. And this is very problematic because, in order to be successful, a humanitarian operation has to be transparent. You need to know what are the goals.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** This is *World Chronicle*. Our guest is Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Judy, do you have a follow-up?

**LESSING:** Well, yes, I'm just interested in what happens when you get out in the field, particularly with what I would assume would be a closer and closer relationship with

the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, because much of your work, it seems to me, is sometimes tied up in what they're doing. So how do you coordinate?

**SOMMARUGA:** Well, there are several ways of coordinating. I would say there is the multilateral approach which has been developed in the United Nations through the DHA [UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs] in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, where we are members — I am going myself several times. We accept it more as observers, even if we are very active. But there is a much more efficient bilateral way of coordinating. And with UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] we have an old tradition of friendship and of transparency. I would not say that there aren't sometimes also some problems, but generally we are very complementary to each other, and we have standards of operating which are similar. And this is very important. Because, for example, in the whole field of human rights, if you have several organizations working and the standards are different, certainly those who are the most stringent, the most severe, may lose the job because others will be more welcome. I also have, with the ICRC but also myself personally, the best relations on the bilateral level with two other UN institutions which are working sometimes with us in the field — this is UNICEF, Ms. Carol Bellamy, and the World Food Programme, Ms. Catherine Bertini. You see, I have all ladies around me! Sadako Ogata, and these two American —

**LITTLEJOHNS:** UNHCR, yes.

**SOMMARUGA:** Yes. It's very good, but we are — I would not say in daily contact, but very often. And once a year we make a senior management meeting with our collaborators, 12, 15 of each side, and we discuss during one or two days all details that we could improve from the headquarters. Certainly in the field our people know each other very well, so that they would say that with these agencies there are sometimes small problems, but there are never major problems.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** No reflection on you, of course, but would you say that perhaps women are more accomplished in the area of humanitarian activities?

**SOMMARUGA:** Well, I would say they have this extraordinary sensitivity, which is the particularity of women as mothers. And I like very much to work with my colleagues, because, indeed, they are very straightforward, leaving political considerations aside and looking directly at the victims.

**BONE:** Since the end of the cold war there's been a spread of inter-ethnic conflicts that take place within States rather than across State borders between States. How has that changed the challenges that the Red Cross has to deal with?

**SOMMARUGA:** Well, it has changed particularly our way of behaviour because of the security of our own delegates. There we had to make a very particular effort in training

our delegates to think a little more to themselves how to be safe in these chaotic situations. Secondly, we had to increase very much dissemination, through media in the different countries, of what is the Red Cross role, what the Red Cross emblem means, why are we there. And these, with all sorts of means, it's not simply the word and the proclamation, it is with the actual pieces, with radio, television, videos, and so on. But this brings us also to more stringent work at the international, multilateral level to strengthen as much as possible those provisions of international law that are applicable also to non-international conflicts. You know that it is certainly already the case that basic humanitarian rules are applicable also in such civil wars. But this has to be worked out, to be commented [upon]. And the International Red Cross Conference in Geneva, with the participation of States and national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, at the end of last year, '95, brought, in my view, real progress in this perception of the rules applicable also in internal conflicts.

**BONE:** And what do you think about the Rwanda and Bosnia war crimes tribunals that have been set up by the United Nations?

**SOMMARUGA:** I would like to say that it was a very courageous decision by the Security Council. We welcome that very much. But, we say, attention — the victims elsewhere than in Rwanda and Yugoslavia have the same right to be protected also in a deterrent way through such tribunals; therefore, we advocate very much what is now worked out in the United Nations — universal international jurisdiction for war crimes.

**LESSING:** So you're really talking now about backing the idea of an international criminal court?

**SOMMARUGA:** Yes. The international criminal court has our support. Certainly we will have to see what will be the details, and particularly we would like to avoid that there is an implication of the political body of the Security Council in the proceedings, because then you may have some question marks as to the functioning of this court.

**LESSING:** Could I turn to something you mentioned right at the beginning, which was land mines? And in one of the releases from the most recent meeting where anti-personnel mines were discussed you said that the Red Cross considers this woefully inadequate — the initial diplomatic response to the devastating effect of these mines. There's been a great deal of publicity around the world about what happens when children play with mines. They are there to maim, not kill people. Well, given that you weren't wholly successful at the most recent Geneva meeting, how do you see this working out? Do you see this as a step-by-step success? Or what are you going to do?

**SOMMARUGA:** First of all, it was not our meeting, even if we were very pushy.

**LESSING:** Right.

**SOMMARUGA:** It was a United Nations conference, and we had worked very much for moving in the direction of a total ban. We are extremely disappointed because those States being there have, on the multilateral level, not made any real progress. But there is progress anyhow, which is outside these negotiations. Today we have 40 countries which have individually declared that they are implementing this total ban. This means a total ban of manufacturing, of stockpiling, of exporting and of using these anti-personnel mines. And this has to go on. Therefore, the ICRC, with many other organizations — and I would say the Secretary-General of the United Nations is very engaged in that — we will continue to press, because it's only through this move that we will have some progress.

You know, we have made the calculation: With the present pace of demining, with the mines which are already in the ground, around 110 million such land mines, in order to demine all those one would need more than 1000 years. So at a certain moment you have to stop this impossible weapon, because it hurts always the non-combatants — women, children, civilians. This is what is non-acceptable.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** But major countries — China, for example, and I think to some extent the United States — seem to be reluctant to go along with the idea of banning these weapons.

**SOMMARUGA:** But I think I would not like to put these two major countries, permanent members of the Security Council, on the same scale. The United States has gone a tremendous way since perhaps 10 months making real progress. They are not yet ready to implement today the total ban, but I am very optimistic, and I think matters are evolving very rapidly in the United States. China, it's quite another thing, and it's not the only larger country that is not ready to participate at all. But the example of the United States may bring many other countries to follow. And I simply would like to insist, to say it must not be because of Bosnia, because of the few incidents — I have a lot of compassion for these people — but the incidents with IFOR. One has to recall that since —

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The Intervention Force in ....

**SOMMARUGA:** Yes. The Intervention Force, military Intervention Force of NATO. Now, one has to recall that for years you have had ten thousands of people that are killed or maimed, amputized, in so many countries — Afghanistan —

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Angola, I think is —

**SOMMARUGA:** — Angola, Somalia, Cambodia, Liberia, Sierra Leon .... And I could go on.

**BONE:** Actually, the American change in position seems to have come from Madeleine Albright, the American Ambassador to the UN, visiting Burundi. That seems to have been what triggered the American position.

**SOMMARUGA:** I agree with you. I complimented Mrs. Albright, particularly after her return from Angola. She was very impressed by the situation in Angola. This was the same trip when she also went to Burundi. And she has really been pushy. But then — and this is the interesting thing in many countries — you have many military people, officers, that are recognizing that the military value of such anti-personnel mines is very limited and, at the same time, they constitute also a threat for their own armies when they are once in the ground, because you cannot detect them, and generally they are not on a map.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. Sommaruga, we have less than a minute left, but we haven't talked about the financing of your Committee. I get solicitations all the time from the American Red Cross but have never had one from ICRC. Where do you get your money?

**SOMMARUGA:** Well, we get our money mainly from Governments, because they have given us a mandate through the Geneva Conventions, and they have to honour this mandate and give us the means. We also receive money, always, voluntary contributions from Red Cross Societies, and also from private. But private —

**LITTLEJOHNS:** So the money we contribute to the American Red Cross finds its way to the ICRC?

**SOMMARUGA:** No, no, not all, but something, certainly, and we are grateful to the American Red Cross. But you are always free also to contribute directly to the ICRC in Geneva. Mr. Littlejohns, I am expecting that from you, too.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I don't have my checkbook here with me, Mr. President!  
[LAUGH] Mr. Sommaruga, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of *World Chronicle*.

Our guest has been Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. He was interviewed by James Bone of *The Times* of London and Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of *World Chronicle*.

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